

Education as a Tool for Youth Empowerment and Sustainable Development in Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper examines the education as a tool for youth empowerment and sustainable development in Nigeria. This study discussed the role of education in empowering Nigerian youth to address key sustainable development goals (SDGs), such as quality education (SDG 4), gender equality (SDG 5), and decent work and economic growth (SDG 8). The paper highlights the critical contribution of youth in advocacy, entrepreneurship, and environmental conservation, showcasing their potential as agents of societal transformation. Despite its transformative potential, Nigeria's education sector faces challenges, including inadequate funding, poor infrastructure, teacher shortages, and disparities in access, especially in rural areas. Addressing these issues requires strategic reforms, including increased funding, curriculum modernization, and equitable access initiatives. The research concluded that, education remains an indispensable tool for youth empowerment and sustainable development in Nigeria. It equips young individuals with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to tackle the multifaceted challenges of the 21st century while driving economic growth, social cohesion, and environmental sustainability. Empowering the youth through education ensures their active participation in the nation's development, fosters innovation, and promotes equity. The research underscores the need for partnerships among government, private sector, and civil society to ensure a robust education system that equips youth with the tools to participate in sustainable economic and social development. Ultimately, empowering Nigerian youth through quality education will harness their creativity and resilience to build a prosperous, inclusive, and sustainable society.

Keywords: Education, Nigeria, Sustainable development, Youth empowerment

Introduction

Education is widely recognized as a powerful tool for youth empowerment and sustainable development, particularly in developing nations like Nigeria. It equips young people with the skills, knowledge, and values necessary to thrive in a rapidly changing world while enabling them to contribute meaningfully to their communities and the nation's progress. Youth empowerment through education fosters critical thinking, creativity, and resilience, which are essential for addressing socio-economic challenges and promoting social cohesion (Amzat & Al-Atabi, 2020). In Nigeria, the significance of education is underscored by its large youth population, which constitutes a substantial portion of the country's labor force. However, the nation grapples with persistent issues such as low literacy rates, high school dropout rates, and unequal access to education, particularly in rural and conflict-prone areas (World Bank, 2021). These challenges are compounded by inadequate infrastructure, teacher shortages, and limited government investment in the education sector.

Education serves as a driver of sustainable development by addressing key United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including quality education (SDG 4), gender equality (SDG 5), and decent work and economic growth (SDG 8). Through quality education, young people acquire the tools to become active participants in sustainable economic activities, environmental conservation, and civic engagement. Furthermore, education fosters innovation and entrepreneurship, creating pathways for youth to tackle unemployment and contribute to national development. Education plays a critical role in shaping individuals and fostering societal development. In Nigeria, a nation with a significant youth population, education serves as a transformative tool for empowering young people and driving sustainable development (Federal Ministry of Education, 2021). Empowered youth are vital agents of change, capable of addressing complex social, economic, and environmental challenges. However, Nigeria faces several obstacles in achieving quality education for all, including inadequate infrastructure, insufficient funding, and disparities in access, particularly in rural areas.

Youth empowerment through education involves equipping individuals with the skills, knowledge, and values necessary to contribute effectively to their communities and participate in national development (UNESCO, 2020). Education also promotes critical thinking, entrepreneurship, and social responsibility, which are crucial for addressing the United Nations Sustainable Development

Goals (SDGs). In this context, the Nigerian government, private sector, and international organizations have initiated programs aimed at improving educational access, quality, and outcomes. Despite these efforts, challenges such as gender inequality, unemployment, and security concerns continue to hinder progress.

Youth Empowerment

Youth empowerment refers to the process of equipping young people with the knowledge, skills, resources, and opportunities they need to take control of their lives, make informed decisions, and contribute meaningfully to their communities and society. It involves fostering their confidence, self-reliance, and ability to influence positive change in their personal lives and the broader social, economic, and political contexts. Youth empowerment is a process where young people are encouraged to take charge of their lives by addressing their situations and taking-action to improve access to resources, skills, and opportunities for their development. It fosters participation in decision-making and self-determination, leading to meaningful contributions to society (Shringarpure, 2023). Youth empowerment involves creating an environment where youth can make informed decisions take responsibility for their actions, and contribute positively to their communities. It is also defined as enabling young people to gain skills, confidence, and agency to influence their circumstances positively and contribute to their communities through education, leadership, and civic engagement (Rezaei & Owens, 2023). Youth empowerment is the process of enabling young people to gain the knowledge, skills, confidence, and opportunities necessary to take control of their communities and society. It involves fostering independence, self-esteem, and the ability to make informed decisions. Youth empowerment emphasizes the importance of fostering resilience, critical thinking, and social awareness in young individuals to create a sustainable and inclusive society (National Center for Biotechnology Information, 2023).

Role of Youth in Sustainable Development

Youth play a critical role in driving sustainable development through their energy, creativity, and ability to innovate. Here are some key ways they contribute to achieving sustainable development goals (SDGs):

1. **Advocacy and Awareness:** Youths are instrumental in spreading awareness about sustainability issues like climate change, inequality, and environmental degradation. They use

social media, campaigns, and grassroots mobilization to educate and inspire action within their communities (United Nations, 2015).

2. **Entrepreneurship and Innovation:** Young people often lead in creating innovative solutions to societal challenges, such as renewable energy projects, waste management initiatives, and sustainable agricultural practices. Youth-driven startups are contributing to economic growth while prioritizing sustainability (Huckle & Wals, 2015).

3. **Community Development:** Many youths engage in volunteering and community service, addressing local challenges like poverty, education, and healthcare. They establish and support community-based organizations that empower marginalized groups and promote sustainable practices.

4. **Policy Advocacy and Leadership:** Youths participate in governance and policy-making processes, advocating for laws and policies that support sustainable development. They serve as representatives in international forums and local councils to ensure youth voices are included in decision-making (Moola & Mostert, 2019).

5. **Education and Capacity Building:** As educators and role models, young people contribute to the spread of knowledge and skills needed for sustainable living. They engage in peer education programs, workshops, and campaigns that promote sustainable lifestyles (UNDP, 2016).

6. **Environmental Conservation:** Youths lead reforestation programs, wildlife protection initiatives, and other conservation efforts. They are key players in climate action movements, urging governments and organizations to prioritize environmental sustainability.

7. **Technological Advancements:** Young innovators use technology to develop solutions such as mobile apps, data analysis tools, and digital platforms that promote sustainable practices (Leicht, 2018). They leverage artificial intelligence, IOT, and other technologies to address complex sustainability challenges.

8. **Cultural Change and Influence:** Youths influence societal attitudes and behaviors by promoting inclusivity, equity, and environmental responsibility.

Role of Education in the empowerment of youth in Nigeria

Education plays a crucial role in the empowerment of youth in Nigeria, offering opportunities for personal development, economic independence, and social engagement. Research highlights that education enables young individuals to acquire the knowledge, skills, and values necessary to

make informed decisions, contribute meaningfully to the economy, and navigate societal challenges (Adeniran, 2020). According to Agboola and Akinlabi (2019), education, particularly vocational and entrepreneurial education, equips youths with the tools for self-employment, thereby reducing unemployment and fostering economic growth. Furthermore, Uwaifo (2009) emphasizes the significance of technical and vocational education in providing youth with practical skills that align with market demands, enhancing their employability and self-sufficiency. Additionally, the impact of education on youth empowerment extends to social dimensions, with educational systems serving as a platform for critical thinking, leadership development, and civic engagement. As noted by Eze (2022), the alignment of university education with national development goals not only improves employability but also contributes to the broader empowerment of youth by preparing them for active participation in societal and political affairs. The empowerment of women through education, particularly in Nigeria's socio-cultural context, further contributes to the national development agenda, as educated women are more likely to contribute to family well-being and the wider community (Nzewi, 2015).

However, challenges such as inadequate funding, outdated curricula, and socio-cultural barriers persist in Nigeria's educational system, which undermine the full realization of education's potential for youth empowerment. Therefore, strategic reforms that include curriculum updates, increased investment in education, and policy implementation to promote inclusivity are essential to maximizing education's role in empowering Nigeria's youth (Olusegun et al., 2022). Education is a vital tool for youth empowerment, offering opportunities for self-development and active participation in societal growth. In Nigeria, education's impact on youth empowerment is profound, shaping individuals' economic, social, political, and cultural contributions. Adeniran (2020) Stated that, education provides youth with essential skills and knowledge to secure employment, create businesses, and achieve financial independence. By fostering entrepreneurship, education helps reduce poverty and drives economic growth. Skilled and educated youth are better positioned to access higher-paying jobs and contribute to national productivity. While Agboola, & Akinlabi (2019) put forth that, Education enhances social mobility, promoting equality and inclusiveness in Nigerian society. It raises awareness of fundamental rights, health issues, and gender equality. Educated youth are more likely to advocate

for social change, challenge discrimination, and support initiatives that foster community development.

Consequently, Eze (2022) has stated that Educated youth are more likely to participate in democratic processes and governance. They engage in voting, advocacy, and policymaking, ensuring accountability and transparency in leadership. Education also nurtures critical thinking and leadership skills, preparing young people for active roles in national development. Nzewi (2015) further stated that in today's digital age, education equips youth with digital and technological skills. This enables them to innovate, solve problems, and participate in the global economy. Technologically empowered youth can contribute to fields such as IT, engineering, and science, addressing Nigeria's development challenges. Olusegun, Okafor & Okeke (2022) Education fosters cultural awareness and unity in a diverse nation like Nigeria. It helps young people appreciate their cultural heritage while respecting others, promoting national cohesion. Additionally, education instills ethical values such as integrity, accountability, and empathy, essential for leadership and societal progress.

Sustainable Development

Sustainable development is the process of meeting the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Sustainable development is the pursuit of development that balances the needs of people, the planet, and profit, ensuring that future generations can meet their needs (Leal Filho et al, 2019). It involves a balanced approach that promotes economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental protection, ensuring long-term well-being and the preservation of natural resources and ecosystems for future generations. Dyllick & Muff (2016) define sustainable development as "A development paradigm that emphasizes the integration of environmental, economic, and social dimensions of sustainability, focusing on long-term well-being for all". While Sachs (2015) describes sustainable development as "The process of improving the quality of human life while living within the carrying capacity of supporting ecosystems." O'Riordan & Jordan (2017) define sustainable development as "A dynamic process that fosters economic growth, environmental sustainability, and social equity through active engagement of all stakeholders."

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a set of 17 interconnected goals established by the United Nations in 2015 as part of the 2030 Agenda

for Sustainable Development. These goals aim to address global challenges, including poverty, inequality, climate change, environmental degradation, peace, and justice, ensuring a better and sustainable future for all. United Nations (2015) identified 17 SDGs which included:

1. **No Poverty:** End poverty in all its forms everywhere.
2. **Zero Hunger:** End hunger, achieve food security, improve nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture.
3. **Good Health and Well-being:** Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages.
4. **Quality Education:** Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities.
5. **Gender Equality:** Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.
6. **Clean Water and Sanitation:** Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all.
7. **Affordable and Clean Energy:** Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy for all.
8. **Decent Work and Economic Growth:** Promote sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all.
9. **Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure:** Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization, and foster innovation.
10. **Reduced Inequality:** Reduce inequality within and among countries.
11. **Sustainable Cities and Communities:** Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable.
12. **Responsible Consumption and Production:** Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns.
13. **Climate Action:** Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts.
14. **Life Below Water:** Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas, and marine resources for sustainable development.
15. **Life on Land:** Protect, restore, and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, forests, combat desertification, halt land degradation, and prevent biodiversity loss.

16. **Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions:** Promote peaceful and inclusive societies, provide access to justice, and build effective, accountable institutions.

17. **Partnerships for the Goals:** Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize global partnerships for sustainable development.

Challenges Facing Education in Nigeria

i. **Inadequate Funding:** Education in Nigeria is underfunded, with allocations consistently below the UNESCO-recommended 20% of the national budget (UNESCO, 2015). This financial neglect results in a lack of critical infrastructure, insufficient teaching materials, and underpaid educators, undermining the overall quality of education (Edukugho, 2021).

ii. **Poor Infrastructure:** Many schools operate without basic facilities like functional classrooms, laboratories, libraries, and sanitation. Rural areas are particularly affected, exacerbating educational inequality (World Bank, 2020). Overcrowding in classrooms also limits effective teaching and learning.

iii. **Teacher Shortages and Low Quality:** Nigeria faces a shortage of qualified teachers, particularly in rural areas. Poor salaries and working conditions result in low teacher motivation and quality (Nwadiani, 2022). Consequently, students receive inadequate instruction, impacting their academic outcomes.

iv. **High Dropout Rates:** Economic hardship, early marriage, and child labor are major factors driving high dropout rates. Gender disparities are notable, with more girls leaving school compared to boys (UNICEF, 2019). This perpetuates cycles of poverty and reduces the nation's human capital.

v. **Insecurity:** Violence from groups like Boko Haram, as well as banditry and kidnappings, disrupts education in northern Nigeria. Thousands of schools have been closed due to insecurity, leaving children displaced or out of school (Amnesty International, 2020).

vi. **Outdated Curriculum:** The curriculum in Nigerian schools often fails to align with modern trends and market needs. Limited emphasis on digital literacy and vocational training leaves students unprepared for the demands of the 21st-century workforce (Okonkwo & Nnadi, 2023).

vii. **Corruption and Mismanagement:** Corruption in the education sector results in the misallocation of resources, with funds often failing to reach schools in need. This reduces the impact of government and donor investments (Transparency International, 2021).

- viii. **Inequality in Access:** Urban-rural disparities, gender biases, and socioeconomic barriers prevent equitable access to education. Rural schools often lack resources compared to urban counterparts, and children with disabilities face additional challenges (Federal Ministry of Education, 2022).
- ix. **Language Barriers:** The dominance of English as the medium of instruction marginalizes children who speak indigenous languages, particularly in the early years of schooling (Ezenwa, 2021). This contributes to poor comprehension and learning outcomes.
- x. **Impact of Population Growth:** Nigeria's rapidly growing population puts immense pressure on the education system. Existing schools are overcrowded, and there are insufficient resources to accommodate increasing numbers of students (UNICEF, 2019).
- xi. **Lack of Political Will:** Inconsistent policies and a lack of long-term planning have hindered education reforms in Nigeria. Successive governments have failed to prioritize education as a driver of development (Aina, 2020).

Conclusion

Education remains an indispensable tool for youth empowerment and sustainable development in Nigeria. It equips young individuals with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to tackle the multifaceted challenges of the 21st century while driving economic growth, social cohesion, and environmental sustainability. Empowering the youth through education ensures their active participation in the nation's development, fosters innovation, and promotes equity. Despite its potential, the Nigerian education sector faces critical challenges, including inadequate funding, poor infrastructure, outdated curricula, and socio-economic disparities. Addressing these barriers requires a collective effort by the government, private sector, civil society, and international partners to prioritize education reforms, invest in infrastructure, and promote inclusivity. A sustainable future for Nigeria depends on empowering its youth through quality education. By aligning educational policies with sustainable development goals and ensuring equitable access, the nation can harness the energy, creativity, and resilience of its youth to build a prosperous and inclusive society.

Suggestions

1. The Nigerian government should prioritize education funding by meeting or exceeding the UNESCO-recommended 20% of the national budget. Adequate funding will support the

construction of essential infrastructure, provision of learning materials, and better remuneration for teachers, ensuring a more effective education system.

2. Education stakeholders should address the disparities in educational access between urban and rural areas; the government should invest in building and renovating schools in rural and underserved regions. This includes providing basic facilities like clean water, electricity, and internet access to enhance the learning environment.

3. Nigeria should implement comprehensive teacher training programs to improve the quality of education. Furthermore, offering better salaries, professional development opportunities, and incentives will help retain qualified teachers, especially in rural areas.

4. The Nigerian curriculum should be reformed to meet the demands of the 21st-century workforce, emphasizing digital literacy, vocational training, and entrepreneurship. This reform should aim to equip students with practical skills that match the needs of the labor market.

5. Gender disparities in education should be addressed through targeted programs that support girls' education. Scholarships, awareness campaigns, and initiatives aimed at reducing early marriages and child labor will help ensure that girls remain in school and reach their full potential.

6. The Nigerian government must prioritize the safety and security of students, particularly in conflict-prone areas. Efforts should include the establishment of safe learning environments and increased security measures to protect students from violence, abductions, and other threats.

7. Strengthening vocational and technical education will empower Nigerian youth by providing them with the practical skills needed for self-employment and entrepreneurship. Government and private sector partnerships can play a key role in creating opportunities for training and apprenticeship programs.

8. Cultural beliefs and practices that hinder access to education, particularly for girls and children in certain communities, must be challenged through public awareness campaigns. Community involvement and local leadership should be harnessed to create a more inclusive education system.

9. Expanding digital education through online learning platforms and incorporating technology into classrooms can help bridge educational gaps. Investment in e-learning tools, digital libraries, and online courses will make education more accessible, particularly in underserved regions.

10. Strengthening the collaboration between the Nigerian government, international organizations, the private sector, and civil society is essential to overcome the educational challenges facing the country. This collective effort will help mobilize resources, expertise, and innovative solutions to improve the education sector and contribute to youth empowerment.

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